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Novelist's Arrest Seen Tied to Ky's Campaign

By Richard Harwood
Washington Post Staff Writer

SAIGON, June 25—On the first or second day of June—the precise date is uncertain—the novelist and literary critic, Vu Hanh, was secretly arrested by the special branch of the national police.

His fate became known last week; the police announced that Hanh was in custody and had confessed to "helping the Communists in their attempt to conquer South Vietnam."

The police refused to elaborate on Hanh's alleged crime. They refused the request of American journalists to interview the writer and refused to make available copies of his confession.

Vast Numbers

American officials estimate that thousands of political prisoners are being held by the Ky government in jails and detention camps throughout South Vietnam. "Vast numbers," according to a document issued by the U.S. Agency for International Development last November, "... have never

been tried and ... have no idea when or how they will ever be released."

Only yesterday, a prominent local businessman, Ngu Tang, whose family had reported him kidnaped some time ago, turned up in the hands of the police. He was charged with conducting Communist propaganda among Saigon intellectuals. Earlier this month, the writer, Nguyen Si Hong, was arrested, although that fact has not yet been officially announced, nor the charges against him.

The case of Vu Hanh, however, was in some ways different. Nearly six months ago the rabble-rousing Saigon Newspaper, Song, accused Hanh of pro-Communist leanings. The charge stirred a major controversy in journalistic and literary circles, with a majority of the Saigon newspaper and writers coming to Hanh's defense. The government propaganda ministry, which controls the Vietnamese press, was forced to intervene and stop the debate.

In effect, the ministry exonerated Hanh of Pro-Communist leanings. Hanh thereupon filed a slander suit against Song and its free-swinging publisher, Chu Tu. If successful, he would have collected damages and Tu would have been forced to close down his newspaper.

Delay Granted

Tu asked the court for a postponement of the suit. It was granted. He then asked for another postponement and it was granted. But a firm trial date was then set—June 10.

With Hanh's arrest, Tu got another reprieve, perhaps a permanent one.

The arrest and the slander suit appeared to be unrelated except for one coincidental circumstance. Song's newspaper is supported, according to a written report made by the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office some weeks ago, by both Premier Ky and Brig. Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan chief of the national police and director of military security.

Many of the articles in Song are written by officers of Ky's regime. Gen. Loan, a powerful

and shadowy figure in Vietnamese affairs, is actively promoting Ky's presidential aspirations through the instrument of the national police.

Suspicious Stimulated

These circumstances have aroused speculation in the Vietnamese literary community that Hanh was arrested, in part, to protect Song from the consequences of the slander suit and hence to protect an organ that may prove important in General Ky's campaign.

These suspicions have been further stimulated by the belief that Hanh was not arrested on any warrant issued by a Vietnamese court but was seized on the orders of General Loan, who has virtually unlimited authority to detain any person "considered as dangerous to national defense and public security."

American officials here have taken a wholly indifferent at-

titude toward the case. One of the highest officials in the American civilian mission, when asked about the case, replied:

"We don't have time to go around investigating every arrest that's made in Saigon."

Vietnamese writers, when guaranteed anonymity, are pessimistic.

"It is not greatly different now," a respected journalist said yesterday, "than under the Diem regime. The controls are very effective."

No magazine or newspaper can be published without the consent of the Ky government. No writer can be accredited without first passing a security investigation conducted by General Loan's agency. No article can appear without the approval of Ky's censors.

One of Hanh's literary friends said yesterday: "The only people who have

profited from this arrest are the Vietcong and Hanoi. Their broadcasts are already full of it. They are using it as proof that there is no intellectual freedom in South Vietnam."